

# ***Eastern Regional Mental Health Board, Inc.***

**The citizen's voice in mental health policy.**

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## **Mental Health, Public Health and The Year of Education: Get it together**

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The DMHAS, DCF, and DPH budgets give us much to be thankful for this year. They are mostly untouched from last year, and in this fiscal climate, that may be the best that most of us can hope for. There is even some caseload growth money and a *token* one percent cost of living increase for non-profit providers, starting January 1.

There is still room for concern, however. In this Year of Education, we must make sure that children are able to take advantage of these changes in the school environment. The budgets under consideration send mixed signals. The DMHAS Young Adult Services programs (YAS) are cut by \$480,000 and the DPH School-based Health Clinics are cut \$400,000. While the DMHAS cut may be made up elsewhere, the DPH cut shows a misunderstanding of the need for something very different than most public health programs.

Children with behavioral issues, whether from trauma, biology, or genetics, are no longer condemned to drift downward through school systems that do not know how to deal with them. Or, rather, they do not have to be. Too often, their education is wasted in internal exile or neglect because schools spend their resources *defending against* the cost, training, or effort to offer help. Students see school as a place of blame and punishment for being who they are. Parents, too, are blamed instead of being made partners in plans coordinated between school and home.

I *sympathize* with schools that have to do too much with too little, but I *empathize* with the students and parents. Schools should know that **good care is always cheaper than bad care**. We heard about many examples at the recent meetings in Manchester and Camden. The lives of teachers and administrators *as well as* students will be better with more health and mental health professionals on the team. They need to be allies, not rivals. They need to learn that the best defense is a *partnership*, not a new offense.

Is this a budget issue? Yes, because DPH should want to *expand* these services not cut them. Only 73 schools have mental health services as part of their health services. Increasing that number may be a long term goal, but we can start now with pilot money to improve the climate, improve consultation, and create an alliance between school, family, and professionals. When schools learn that progress is possible, *they* will support the continued growth of those services, and I won't have to. The payoff will come when those kids *learn*, stay in school, get jobs, and pay taxes. Otherwise, we will come back year after year pleading for young adult services, public housing, police, and prison programs.

So, if you want to improve test scores, stop wasting money *and kids*, and end the embarrassment of "scream rooms," then you should make it possible for *all* kids to get something out of school besides bullying and resentment. Put money *back* in to school based clinics, and perhaps transfer them to an agency that appreciates what they can do.

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